Polycarp: A Faithful Witness · The Cornerstone Bible College and Seminary

Polycarp, the famed bishop of Smyrna, is a colossal figure among the Aposotlic Fathers. He is renowned for his gracious and faithful shepherding, his unwavering allegiance to the truth of Christ, and for his death. To that lattermost end, at the age of eight-six, Polycarp died as a Martyr in his own city. This event was preserved shortly thereafter in The Martyrdom of Polycarp by the "church of God that sojourns at Smyrna."[1] It remains "the first recorded martyrdom in post-New Testament church history."[2] Polycarp chose to follow after his kind Lord even unto death. Thomas F. Torrance writes that, "in the figure of Polycarp, the author of the Epistles to the Philippians, we have the most venerable of the Aposotlic Fathers, and perhaps the chief depository of the primitive Gospel tradition."[3]

The Man—The Shaping of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna
Polycarp was born in A.D. 69 or 70, most likely in Asia Minor.[4] It was in these important years that the siege and destruction of Jerusalem took place. Scott writes that "that destruction, the death-blow of so many lingering and clinging aspirations, changed the center of apostolic influence from the Holy City to the coast towns of Asia Minor."[5] Polycarp, providentially found himself at the nexus of the first-century church.

In this article, I will consider Polycarp's character from three different vantage points. First, I will investigate what shaped Polycarp as a man; second, I will show how his character was expressed in his martyrdom; and, third, I will explore Polycarp's enduring relevance for Christians of all ages.

Many of its apostolic leaders were still active at this time, and Polycarp was blessed to benefit from their first-hand teaching and exhortation. Irenaeus, himself being Polycarp's own disciple, bore witness to his teacher's early instruction by the Apostles. He writes how Polycarp "would speak of his familiar intercourse with John, and with the rest of those who had seen the Lord; and how he would call their words to remembrance. Whatsoever things he had heard from them respecting the Lord, both with regard to His miracles and His teaching, Polycarp

having thus received [information] from the eye-witnesses of the Word of life, would recount them all in harmony with the Scriptures."[6]

Similarly, Euseubius of Caesarea describes Polycarp as being "the companion of the Apostles."[7] However, he also mentions that he "had been appointed to the bishopric of the church in Smyrna by the eyewitnesses and ministers of the Lord."[8] Thus, Polycarp was not only tutored by the apostles but he was also commissioned as a bishop by those whom the Lord Jesus Christ himself had chosen.[9]

Here then is a true defender of apostolic tradition: Polycarp was both the direct pupil and successor to the apostles. Though this could have been the occasion for hubris, Polycarp's character was marked by humility and grace. Ignatius' Epistle to Polycarp includes this exhortation: "If thou lovest the good disciples only, thou hast no grace; [but] rather subdue those that are evil by gentleness."[10] This pastoral heart typified Polycarp's ministry. This is evident in the only writing of Polycarp's that remains to this day, The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians. The sum of his exhortations to the Philippians is to look to Christ and seek "to walk worthy of His commandment and glory."[11] He did not domineer over his flock because of his apostolic tradition but encouraged his colaborers to be "temperate in all things, compassionate, industrious, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who was the servant of
all."

The humility of Christ was the basis of Polycarp's humility. Polycarp was gripped by Christ. It seems that, along with Paul, Polycarp counted "everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus" (Phil 3.8 ESV). He desired for his people to yearn for their Savior above all else. Holland observes how Polycarp "goes on, again and again, pressing upon them, with crowded texts from St. John, St. Peter, and St. Paul, the beauty of patient self-discipline, bidding them follow after the saints, who loved not the present world, but only Him who died for us."[13] As such, his writings often circle back to the goodness of the gospel, sovereign grace, and the necessity of faith.

With regard to his style, Galli and Olsen write that Polycarp is "unpretentious, humble, and direct."[14] He was not original in his writing but sought to clearly repeat and affirm the teaching of the New Testament without innovation. Ferguson notes that "Polycarp was so saturated with the language of the New Testament that whatever he had to say was expressed in its wording."[15] This is no wonder, since the very authors of the New Testament had been his teachers. The impact of

Polycarp's apostolic disciplers on his own life is hard to overstate. It must also be noted, however, that Polycarp did not tolerate false teachers. When Polycarp met the heretic Marcion he showed remarkable directness and strength. The interaction, as recorded by Eusebius is humorous as well as revealing: "And Polycarp himself, when Marcion once met him and said, 'knowest thou us?' replied, 'I know the first born of Satan.'"[16] Or, rendered by our brother Jaremy in a more 21st century tone, "I know you, first-born of Satan!" In this way, Polcarp showed himself to be humble and gracious with the flock and firm with those whom he knew were wolves.

Taken together, Polycarp was shaped by the apostles and the gospel they proclaimed. He was a kind and understanding shepherd who was appointed by the apostles to care for the flock of God in Smyrna. His writing was thoroughly saturated with the words of the New Testament, such that one could say that his veins flowed with bibline. These were the influences that shaped Polycarp as a man and which would be dramatically manifested in his death.

The Trial—Martyrdom

The death of Polycarp was recorded by the church in Smyrna because "nearly all the preceding events happened in order that the Lord might show us once again a martyrdom that is in accord with the gospel."[17] The authors of The Martyrdom of Polycarp sought to draw parallels between the death of their bishop and the death of Christ. They write that "For he waited to be betrayed, just as the Lord did, in order that we too might be imitators of him, looking not only to our own interests but to our neighbors' interests as well. For it is the mark of true and steadfast love to desire that not only oneself be saved but all the brothers and sisters as well."[18]

Polycarp's martyrdom was in accord with the gospel because he sought to cast himself upon the will of God, because he acted out of love for God and his saints, and because of his faithfulness to Christ to the end. These virtues established Polycarp as an enduring example to imitate for Christians under persecution.

In brief, Polycarp began to experience increased opposition because of the faithfulness of his people in Smyrna.[19] They truly loved God more than this world and were willing to suffer much—death included—for their heavenly king. The people wanted to go for the leader and squash the zealous Christians. As such, the people called for the death of Polycarp, who by this time was eighty-six years old. Since he would not consent to worship the emperor or the Roman gods, legal grounds could easily be found for his death. Polycarp, upon hearing in advance

that the authorities were out to get him, did not want to leave the city. However, he was persuaded by some of his friends to hide on the outskirts of the city. After doing this for several days, Polycarp had a vision of his pillow burning. It was then that he knew he was to be burned alive. When a band of soldiers came looking for him, he refused to run away, remarking “No! The will of God be done!”[20] When the soldiers arrived they were astonished and ashamed that they had been sent out to apprehend such an old man. Rather than treat them poorly, Polycarp asked that food be made for them and that they be fed. In return, he asked for an hour to pray before they took him to the officer of the peace, a man named Herod.

After praying, Polycarp was loaded onto a donkey and taken to the city where Herod attempted to persuade him to offer incense to the emperor so that he might live. However, Polycarp flatly refused. Next, the prisoner was taken to the place of the games and was asked again to recant. The deputy asked him to decry Christianity by saying “Away with the Atheists”—an undoubtedly confused phrase that Polycarp used to his advantage. Here, the account is too moving not to cite directly: “Polycarp looked round with serious eye upon all that made and cruel mob, and then, waving his hand towards them, with a sigh and a look up towards heaven, he said, “Yes; Away with the Atheists! Then the deputy pressed him harder to take the oath and to revile Christ, and then he would set him free. But Polycarp answered: ‘Eighty-and-six years I have been in the service of Christ, and He has never done me wrong; how, then, can I blaspheme Him now,—my King and my Savior?”[21]

After a few more attempts to make him recant, the deputy sentenced him to death by being burned alive. Even in this Polycarp was calm and confidently resigned himself to the will of God. He even warned the deputy that he could only kill him with a temporary fire but that God keeps an eternal fire for the impious. Polycarp offered up one more prayer of praise to his Savior and then the flame was lit.

Polycarp was provided with tremendous grace in his death. He had no need to be nailed to the stake as is customary. He did not struggle against his murders. The flame about him sprung about almost instantaneously and was shaped like a sail, such that he was enclosed in its hollow. Bystanders remarked how the conflagration smelled of baking bread and that he visually appeared as a precious metal being refined in an oven. In this way Polycarp met his end on earth, dying as a glorious Martyr of King Jesus.

Polycarp’s character did not buckle under this tremendous pressure. Rather, he

persevered to the end, resembling Christ's own resolve to be obedient to the Father even to the point of death.

The Legacy—A Faithful Witness

Polycarp's legacy is one of abiding relevance because he is a faithful example to imitate. Polycarp was a humble and gracious servant of Christ. He had been brought up in the sphere of the apostles and appointed by their command. He had faithfully shepherded the flock of God that had been given him, and now—after all these eight-six years—could he betray him? Never. Polycarp knew God and he loved him deeply. He knew that God had never done him any wrong and he desired to be obedient to his gracious Lord even if it cost him his life. Therefore, Polycarp is an example for all Christians, because we have all received this same grace.

We all have the same loving, omnipotent, and sovereign Lord. Our gracious King cares for us with the same tenderness that he did Polycarp. May we rest in Christ and be willing to lay aside for the joy of knowing him as our all-sufficient Savior. So, we do not look to imitate Polycarp as an end in itself, rather we look to him as an example of someone who faithfully followed Christ. Michael Holmes says it well, "the concept of imitation, which could lead to a focus on the martyr, is subordinated to the idea of following after, which emphasizes more the concept of faithfulness and obedience to God's will, in whatever form that may take."[22] Our charge is to be faithful to our King, though the world will despise us for it. Let us be found to be faithful; and may we be encouraged by examples of saints like Polycarp who have run the race well before us.

Notes

[1]Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 307.

[2]Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 360.

[3]Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1948), 90.

[4]Henry S. Holland, *The Apostolic Fathers*: *The Fathers for English Readers* (London; Brighton; New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; E. & J. B. Young & Co., 1897), 177–178.

[5]Holland, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 178.

[6]S. Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons, *Five Books of S. Irenaeus against Heresies*.

Translated by John Keble. A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church (Oxford; London; Cambridge: James Parker and Co.; Rivingtons, 1872), 568.
[7]Eusebius of Caesarea, Trans. by Lake Kirsopp, *The Ecclesiastical History and 2: English Translation* (London; New York; Cambridge, MA: William Heinemann; G. P. Putnam's Sons; Harvard University Press, 1926–1932), 281.
[8]Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 281.
[9]Ignatius' *Epistle to Polycarp* was written in A.D. 115 and indicates that Polycarp was the bishop in Smyrna at this time, though he was certainly appointed earlier than this date.
[10]Ignatius of Antioch, "The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp," in The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 99.
[11]Polycarp of Smryna, "The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians," in The Apostolic Fathers with Justin
Martyr and Irenaeus, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 34.
[12]Polycarp, "Philippians," 34.
[13]Holland, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 188.
[14]Galli and Olsen, *131 Christians*, 361.
[15]Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005) 57. See also Scott's *Aposotlic Fathers*, 183 for more insights into Polycarp's writing style.
[16]Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 187.
[17]Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 307.
[18]Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 307.
[19]The following events are taken from Holland's account found in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 190-99.
[20]Holland, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 192.
[21]Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 194.

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